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Charlebois: He knew his time was fini.

'Fait au Kay-Bec': Local star system keeps pop stars home

Rock & Pop

by Juan Rodriguez

"Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est un JOB."
— R. Ducharme

The first album by Beau Dommage has sold 180,000 copies inside Quebec since its release last November.

That represents more discs than any debut by a Canadian group throughout the entire country (René Simard at 12 years of age, has sold over 200,000 in Quebec). It is also more than any album by Robert Charlebois, also known as **le roi du rock-Quebecois**, a fact of life that Charlebois well foresaw when he decided to take a two-year sabbatical from the Quebec scene to be an actor in three Sergio Leone-produced movies in Europe.

Although he promised to return with a new show for the '76 Olympics, Charlebois knew his time in the local pop demimonde was fini. He had been the major star for a full six years, ever since he revolutionized the "chanson" with his use of the street patois of Montreal, **joual**. No longer would the Quebecers try to translate the melodramatic poetics of the Parisien singers, for joual — with its broken French and English contortions — best reflected the cultural reality of 6,000,000 French-speaking people isolated within an American continent. But the inevitable happened, just like it did for Dylan and Lennon — Robert Charlebois turned 30. He didn't have to look far to see the "nouvelle relève" of groups and singers, such as Beau Dommage, Harmonium, Gilles Valiquette, Les Séguins, Diane Dufresne, Aut'Chose, Plume Latraverse, and others. Even his own band was performing on the side as Ville Emard Blues Band.

Thus, it was ironic that Charlebois' last concert, at Quebec City's Superfrancofête in Aug. 1974, was in the company of the two acknowledged older greats of the Quebec chanson — Félix Leclerc and Gilles Vigneault — banking on the past as a **bon souvenir**. (A recording of the grand event, witnessed by 125,000 on the Plaines d'Abraham — the ultimate pedestal! — was released a year to the day afterwards, bearing the proud title: **J'ai vu le loup, le renard, le lion.**)

Also ironic was the fact that, whereas Charlebois (and his main songwriter Rejean Ducharme, the novelist) was selective in his joual — using it for satiric or humorous effect — the new wave singers use joual as a matter of course. It's the easiest way to identify with the "fait au Kay-Bec" spirit. (In fact, Charlebois has been vehemently attacked for singing some songs in "straight" Parisien French, and his vision of Montreal was decried as "hostile ou indifférent".)

Beau Dommage gives the people what they want: A sentimentalized postcard vision reflecting the current nationalistic feeling.

Charmant!

So, wrapped in smooth lilting harmonies and an Americanized soft-rock sound, the group chirps reveries about the first snow in Chinatown ("Les rues sont glissantes, y'a un accident au coin de St. Hubert pis Jean Talon"), nights in Chateauguay with "ma blonde", taking the metro to Beaubien, and remembrances of seeing Pere Noel at Dupuis Freres department store.

Bravo, nodded the critics. Almost without exception came the cries of "charmant!"

Bruno Dostie, in the independentist Le Jour, dreamed of the day when rue St. Vallier becomes as famous as the Beatles' Penny Lane, and Montreal becomes a "nouvelle Liverpool."

In the scant year since their local debut (as the opening half of Jean-Pierre Ferland's Place des Nations show in July '74), Beau Dommage has hurriedly recreated their ditties at all the local hangouts: The U de M's Centre Sportif, cinema Outremont, the TNM, Café Campus, Le Patriote.

They touched all the bases (putting off Place des Arts, probably because of its "bourgeoisie" tinge). They squeezed in a successful promotion tour of France and Belgium, returning to say that they don't consider it imperative to make it in Europe. "It's here that everything happens for us," they say.

Ah, chez nous! At the launching of Beau Dommage's second disc, **Où est passée la noce?** (with advance orders of 100,000 before its release on Monday), the Quebecois **papparrazzi** crammed into Studio Tempo, where it was recorded (you know, in the old building on rue McGill College in back of the Woolworth's). Within the piped-in sound of Beau Dommage local media heavies and members of other groups inched about. There were stacks of the new album and plenty of eager takers. Movie cameramen and photographers forced their way through the crush, always on the lookout for who was standing with who. The local stars love to come to each other's press parties; they're sure of some coverage.

Support

The success of the post-Charlebois singers in portraying the new Quebec has coincided with increasing provincial government support of pop music, as well adoption in the advertising campaigns of local liquor and tobacco companies. For example, the new official singles and album sales chart in the province is being published by La Quebecoise cigarettes, in collaboration with le Ministre des Affaires Culturelles and l'Association Québécoise des producteurs de Disque, Inc.

Also banking on the future of the Quebec sound are the major Canadian record companies, themselves subsidiaries of U.S. corporations, whereas Quebec has traditionally been an independents' market. The major companies are now willing to pay local recordings whose sound quality is competitive with international standards.

Consequently, whereas at the turn of the decade there was almost no studio in Montreal where a local artiste could obtain a top-quality sound, several custom-made 16 to 24 track recording facilities now provide aural heaven to the new Quebec groups.

The studios (Tempo, Studio Six, Le Studio, RCA "A", Son Québec) have been vying intensely for the patronage of the new wave musicians, and this has resulted in free studio time being donated for live performances broadcast over Montreal's FM stations (in particular, CHOM, CKVL-FM, CKLM, CJFM). These broadcasts have, over the last two years, been crucial to outburst of made-in-Quebec rock music; they've given the groups exposure and a built-in audience before they sign a record contract.

And so it came to pass, the day after their cocktail de presse, Beau Dommage trotted over to the borders of Westmount, P.Q., to talk in two languages about the new album with air personality Doug Pringle.

They said their sound was influenced by such perfectionists as James Taylor, 10cc, Paul Simon and Steely Dan, as well as chansonniers like Brel and Vigneault.

They said they wanted to keep pleasing their fans, quickly adding they'd like to please themselves, too. The first album was a collection of catchy songs ideal for radio airplay, while the second is more ambitious, "the kind to sit at home and listen to."

On the first side of Ou est passée la noce?, they consolidate their success by rolling out little epistles on the summer of Expo 67 (Le blues d'la métropole), hanging out watching color TV in a motel in Ile Perrot, and discovering the joys of puberty with "la gang" at Belmont Parc.

Side two is entirely devoted at a 20-minute opus, entitled Un incident à Bois-Des-Filion, that is evidently intended to show how Beau Dommage is moving on to more challenging musical frontiers. The piece lumbers along with a pseudo-apocalyptic romantic tale, and the group feebly assimiliates the structural ideas of Pink Floyd and Frank Zapa (both enormously admired chez nous). This is a simplistic struggling attempt to sound like the "musiciens progressives' that Beau Dommage and their fans listen to, and it only magnifies the limited talent required for their shorter jingles of lore from la vie Montréalaise.

If Beau Dommage is considered the Beatles of Quebecois rock, the Aut'Chose is the Rolling Stones.

Rougher

Their first album, **Prends une chance avec moé**, celebrates a rougher existence.

Leader Lucien Francoeur, the poet, barks out deadpan praises to the world of the **hot dog stimé**. "I write like everyone speaks," he said to the Montreal Matin. "My show isn't a French course, there are institutions for that. The proof is that although I finished school with 55 per cent in literature, I've published five books. And those who had 90 per cent are today relegated to the forgotten."

Francoeur's exposition of cheapness ("J'écris mes chansons, A la lumière de Claude Néon") results in droll satirical nuances of joual. He builds up Le Freak de Montréal by presenting two instrumentals — a souped-up version of The Theme From the Godfather, with a twangy Ventures sound, and a 20-second renaissance guitar brocade. Then Le Freak arrives, "un stéréo dans mon cerveau," reeking of patchouli, he listens to 'Pink Floy' and eats 'hot doys.'

The album is climaxed by a predominantly English song, Bar-B-Q Lady, which starts with the kind of hovering transcendent sound the Quebec rock fans love the Moody Blues for. Francoeur's accent dominates his lyrics: "She's the whore of the band, She lives for the End, Take her by the hand, Doesn't it feel like sand . . ." C'est une fille de l'est . . . etc."

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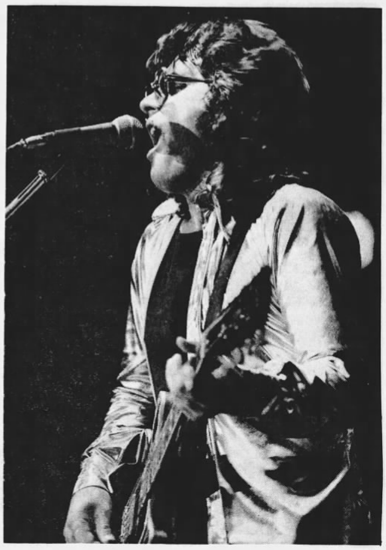

Michel Pagliaro: He emerged for the local star system despite his chameleon-like recording career.

Beau Dommage: A sentimentalized postcard vision of the current nationalistic feeling.

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